Waking From a Self-Deluded Illusionary Coma

Steve Reedy

Cultural Diversity

Dr. D

March 20, 2006

Because we've removed ourselves so far from nature during countless years of evolution, civilization has basically become an artificial habitat, a free roaming human zoo, in which we can experience life without the fear of being eaten. Everyone of us, of every race, on every content is born into this captive society where we are trained by the members of our subgroups on how to act and think so we can eventually roam free throughout our habitat without supervision. Our perception of this habitat is built on the foundation we created as we experienced childhood, and the definitions our trainers gave our experiences as they attempted to instill in us their perception of the habitat.

There is no easy way of explaining the world. This is because the world we are attempting to explain is a product of both perception and reality. We have a perception we created to help us identify the world we live in. We then place this perception on top of reality so that the world becomes centered on us. There is a fine line between perception and illusion. Knowing that the world we see through our eyes is a perception we created in our mind requires that we have some basic understanding that how we relate to what we see and feel is based on the socio economic make up of our surroundings and experiences, our relationship with ourselves and others, and the biological chemistry and make-up of our thought processes. Without this knowledge, we risk living in a self-deluded illusionary coma were our self-centered preception is not only a reality for us, but for everyone.

As therapists, we must understand that a majority of our clients may be consciously or subconsciously fighting to stay in their coma or in the process of trying to come out of it. In order to better treat these clients, it may help us to have an understanding of how the coma was created. A good example of how an illusion is created can be seen in how we develop the textbooks we use in our public schools. Textbooks have become the key means by which our teachers impart knowledge to us. It is hoped that this knowledge will influence and educate in a way that will benefit not only us, but also our society. The intent behind this seems admirable, but what went into our textbooks was battled over by special interest groups who hoped to influence

and mold our minds into accepting their perception of reality. To do this, each group fought to

control what was placed into the book in an attempt to influence the book's perception of the

world. For example, the Texas Board of Education changed their health textbooks to support the

idea of marriage as a "lifelong union between a husband and a wife" by forcing the publishers of

the book to change the phrase "married partners" to "husband and wife" (The New Standard,

2004). Other religious groups are fighting for the inclusion of other Bible friendly concepts like

intelligent design, which would present an alternative to evolutionism and completely alter the

book's perception of the field of science and any related subjects like biology or history.

Scholastic history creates a perception of our past from which we can build our future; therefore it

is vitally important for these special interest groups infuse their perception of history into the

textbook in order to place it in the foundation of the reader.   For example, religious groups had

the text of a sixth grade Texas social studies book changed from, "Glaciers formed the Great

lakes millions of years ago" to "Glaciers formed the great lakes in the distant past" to avoid any

conflicts with "Biblical Timelines", even though the original text is supported by evidence that is

undisputed by scientists (cooper, 2003). Even the history of racism is fought over, with

arguments that textbooks create a portrayal of slavery that is "too negative" (Borowski, 2002) and

that textbooks should avoid any form of stereotyping which ultimately minimizes the books ability

to present the adversity minorities had to face throughout history. While others argue that the

textbook should create a perception that we are all universally the same instead of showing how

to accept the differences of others (Segall, 2003).

Textbooks are also filled with "feel-good myths" that have been past down through the centuries

masquerading as historically factual information. For example, the legend of Harriet Tubman and

the Underground Railroad would give the book a distortedly sugarcoated perception of the history

of the black movement (Chesson) that avoids giving any clear discussions on the history of

racism, what perpetuates it today, and how it might be reduced in the future.

In the end, after being influenced by religious groups, ethnic groups, political groups, marketing groups, groups who support other groups, groups against other groups, and their desire to make hundreds of millions in revenue, publishing companies create a textbook that sanitizes any form of political, social, and economic controversy by reducing it to a kid-friendly version of reality that hopefully wont upset anyone. The book, infused with a perception of the world that is loosely based on reality, is then published, printed, and then purchased by school boards all across America.

Like the textbooks we learned from, we were provided a very limited and often distorted perception of reality during our childhood. Many of us never thought to question what our family, peers, media, and religions were placing into us. Instead, we took what they said as truth, and from this we created a perception based on what James Marcia calls, in his four stages of identity development, "identity foreclosure". In this stage of our identity development we accept the roles handed down to us and use them to create our understanding of race, gender, sexual orientation, and everything else that forms our reality. Marcia points out that we make this kind of identity commitment when we have not experienced what Erickson calls an "identity crisis". An "identity crisis" can be triggered when we experience something that contradicts our perception of reality. If we don't have a reason to question our reality, we may see our perception as the norm instead of something we created in our mind. If this happens, we can only hope to experience a crisis powerful enough to knock us out of our illusionary coma, out of our identity foreclosure stage, and into what Marcia calls the state of "identity achievement", where we let go of our childhood perceptions as we begin questioning our reality.

Our journey toward identity achievement is different for each of us depending on our race, religion, social up bringing, life experiences, and everything else we've used to create our foreclosed identity. For example, some of us may experience an identity crisis when encounter something that conflicts with our perception of racism. If we were born into a dominant subgroup, like White society in North America, we may create a distorted view of our subgroup based on

what J. H. Katz calls the "invisible veil". Under the veil we are unable to see the reality we created in our mind as just a perception. This is because everything we've used to create our perception it is so interwoven in the fabric of our everyday life that we don't think to question it. We just see it as the norm, instead of the beliefs, values, and behaviors of one distinct cultural group (Katz, 1985). Janet Helms refers to this as the "Contact" ego status, a stage in our life where we are generally oblivious to how we benefit from being part of the dominant society. Because of this, we may not even realize there is a dominant society. Gerald Wing Sue and David Sue call this "Ethnocentric Monoculturalism", an unconscious illusion where we believe that "regardless of race, culture, ethnicity or gender, everyone shares the nature of reality and truth." (Sue et al, 2003).

Professors Eric Knowls and Kaiping Peng, in their study of White dominant group identity, present a possible cause for our inability to see beyond the veil of our Ethnocentric Monoculturalism. In every culture there is a myth of an "ingroup", a norm. The norm is then held up as something we should desire to become. As members of the dominant society, we often feel a "sense of connection, or identification, with the ingroup category." (Knowles, 2005) If we identify ourselves with the ingroup, then we have no reason to question our perception because we consider it to be the norm to which every other subgroup should strive for. We've defined ourselves as "normal" and "to be defined as 'normal' means not to be defined at all, to just 'be'" (Perry et al, 2002). This is why creating our identity in the dominant society differs from other subgroups because we are more likely to experience ourselves as the norm, instead of a separate race and subculture.

If we do incorporate our race into our identity, it is to the degree that our race is perceptually distinctive in our environment" (Knowles, 2005). This means the more we're surrounded by people other than our race, the more we'll define ourselves by our race, and interact with other cultures based on how we identify other races against our perceived ingroup. The same goes for any subgroup; gender, religion, or sexual orientation that doesn't fit into what we've defined in our illusionary perception of reality as normal.

As therapists we know how difficult it may be for someone to hear something that contradicts their reality. Since an "identity crisis" can only be triggered when something contradicts our perception of reality, our inability to acknowledge the contradiction makes it very difficult for us to begin the process of moving into a state of "identity achievement." We are unable to process the contradictions for several reasons. First, because we've created our core foundation on the premise that our perception is reality, our subconscious will go to great lengths to protect that foundation so we can continue building our life on it. To protect our foundation, our subconscious has created several defense mechanisms to help us resolve conflicts between the reality presenting itself and the illusion we're attempting to hold onto. For example, if we are white and have created a perception of reality that has no concept of White privilege in North America, then, according to Helms "contact" identity stage, it is our "obliviousness" that maintains our perception. But, if we begin to realize that we have more privileges than Blacks, we may feel a great deal of anxiety as we move into the Helms stage of "disintegration" where our perception of reality is threatened (Utsey, 2002). As our perception is threatened and we feel anxiety, our ego uses defense mechanisms like denial, selective attention, rationalization, transference of blame, identification, and projection to attack, distort, or help us become selectively unaware of certain conflicting aspects in our internal or external reality" (Utsey, 2002). For example, if we find ourselves questioning if Blacks are victims of White privilege, and we didn't even realize White privilege existed, our anxiety may cause us to find a way to counter that thought. We may counter the thought by taking on the belief that we are all part of one human family, creating a "colorblind" ideology that would spare us the discomfort of having to acknowledge the existence of White privilege (Knowles, 2005). By resolving the identity crisis, we can return to the Helms stage of "contact" and continue moving forward in our self-deluded illusionary coma. If we are unable to ignore the conflict, our defense system may move us on to the Helms stage of "Reintegration", where we would try to alleviate our anxiety and avoid the identity crisis by finding ways to validate our sense of White racial superiority over Blacks (Utsey, 2002).   Or we might create an attitude consistent with Rita Hardiman's "acceptance stage" where we resort to victim

blaming by believing that "everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed" and that "the lack of success of minority groups is seen as evidence of some negative personal or group characteristic" (Sue et al, 2003).

If the identity crisis bypasses our defense, allowing us to question our perceptions and release us from our state of identity foreclosure, there are several models that describe the stages we can go through as we move toward a state of "identity achievement".   For example, if we are trying to break free from the illusion of a dominant racial subculture, Hardiman and Helms proposed two separate stage models that we may go through as we begin the process of creating a less deluded identity. The Helm's model appears to allow for more introspection and self-evaluation that may ultimately lead us to question aspects of our identity that have nothing to do with our race.

Another identity stage model created by Atkison, Morten, and Sue identifies "the stages oppressed people experience as they struggle to understand themselves in terms of their own culture, the dominant culture, and the oppressive relationship between two cultures." (Sue et al, 2003).   Unlike the Helms model, their "racial/cultural identity development model" can be used by anyone, even the White members of the dominant society.   This is because each of us created our identity using the ideologies of varying subgroups. As Pavi Fadjukoff, Lea Pulkkinen, and Katja Kokko and point out in their study on identity process in adulthood, as we get older, the ideologies provided by our subgroups used to form our perception may create an "incongruent diffusion" as our sense of identity evolves with experience (Fadjukoff, 2005). This means that we may create an identity crisis as our subgroups begin conflicting with each other. For example, if we identified ourselves as a White Baptist, then experienced homosexual tendencies as we grew older, we may create an identity crises because our religion and our sexual preference conflict. We then become part of the oppressed group that fits into the R/CID model, rather than part of the dominant society associated with the Helms model.   No matter what race we may identify ourselves as, or which identity model we may find ourselves in, once we realize that our

perception is not the norm, but a group of ideologies specific only to us, our mind drops its defenses allowing us to explore other aspects of our identity like gender, religion, nationalism, and morality creating a domino effect that lifts us out of our coma and into a more awakened state of being.

To wakeup we require a conflict to knock us out of our mind, otherwise we risk staying in a state of foreclosure. Therefore, as therapist we must see an identity crises as a positive side effect during one's journey toward an awakening. It is not something that should be suppressed but explored in an effort to help our clients move from one identity stage to the next toward identity achievement. This may be a very difficult journey as the foundation we created as children has affected and infected the vast neuro network that creates our thought and actions. Letting that foundation go would lead us into the unknown, which is often far more intimidating than staying in our present condition. As children we were brainwashed with inaccuracies, beliefs, and opinions disguised as fact telling us how we should think act and feel. Unlike someone who is recovering from being brainwashed, we are not assigned an exit counselor when we come out of our coma. Because of this a client may not know that the reason they are seeking therapy is because they are in the middle of and identity crises so, even though we may recognize what our client is experiencing, we must be careful how we approach it or we may trigger our client's defenses and throw them back into a state of foreclosure.

We live in a civilization that is constantly rewriting its history to change its future. Because of the beliefs, opinions, and misinformation that dominate our society, each of us is in a different stage of identity development working toward the same goal, identity achievement. Since we require differences between our subgroups to help us wake from our coma and realize that our perception is individual only to us and not shared by everyone, we should embrace our cultural diversity and be thankful for the understanding and enlightenment it ultimately provides all of humanity.

References

Texas textbooks to reflect anti-gay, anti-safe sex attitudes. (2004). *The New Standard*. Retrieved Mar 01, 2006, from http://newstandardnews.net/content/index.cfm/items/1203/printmode/true

Cooper, Anderson ."Interview With U of Texas Professor on Texas Board of Education's Textbook Content Selection Process." <u>CNN: Live From The Headlines</u>. Transcript, . 9 Jul 2003. Transcript. 01 Mar 2006 <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0307/09/se.01.html>. (not APA style)

Borowski, J. (2002). Is the trend of trashing textbooks in texas going national? . Retrieved Mar. 01, 2006, from Common Dreams Web site: http://www.commondreams.org/views02/0827-06.htm.

Segall, S. (2003, Dec 01). Another way to burn a book. Retrieved Mar 01, 2006, from http://www.policyreview.org/dec03/segall.html.

Chesson, M. B. (n.d.). Schoolbooks teach falsehoods and feel-good myths. *The Textbook Letter*, 12,1. Retrieved Mar 01, 2006, from http://www.textbookleague.org/121tubby.htm.

Katz, J. H. (1985). The sociopolitical nature of counseling. *Counseling Psychologist*, *13*(4), 615-624.

Knowles, E. D., & Peng, K. (2005). White selves: conceptualizing and measuring a dominant-group identity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,*, *89*(2), 223-241.

Perry, P. (2002). *Shades of white: white kids and racial identities in high school* . Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Utsey, S. O., & Gernat, C. A. (2002). White racial identity attitudes and the ego defense mechanisms used by white counselor trainees in racially provocative counseling situations. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *80*(4), 475-484.

Sue, D., & Sue, D. (2003). *Counseling the culturally diverse*. 4 ed. New York: John Wiley & Sones.

Fadjukoff, P., Pulkkinen, L., & Kokko K. (2005). Identity processes in adulthood: diverging domains.. *Identity*, *5*(1), 1-20.